Barbara Bruno Lancaster, Former Cult Member

In 1972, I joined a study group. In 1984, I woke up to find that I had willingly given away my life -- for 12 years – under an illusion that I was making myself a better person and the world a better place to live in. This wasn't a dream, I was in a cult.

That sounds pretty drastic. How could anyone let themselves get hooked into such a situation? I was then 27 (hardly a child). Now I must take responsibility for *not having taken responsibility*. I was a thinker, an artist, a reader who envied the people in history who were lucky enough to live in times where there were opportunities to become part of a movement that made a contribution to humanity. I wanted to understand "what makes us tick," but found no answers in modern psychology. Perhaps there was an elusive ancient knowledge that I might discover today. I feared a wasted life, and doubted my ability to live self-directedly.

In 1972, I wished to study a psychology called *The 4th Way*, which is based on the early 20th century writings of George Gurdjieff and Peter Ouspensky. This philosophy proposes an esoteric system of achieving a permanent higher level of consciousness and stresses the need to find a "real" 4th Way school led by a consciously-developed teacher. After finding a bookmark from a group (I will call it the "SOS"), I attended a series of prospective student meetings and came into contact with people who certainly *acted* esoteric. They were speaking knowledgeably on a subject of great interest to me. I was asked to try a few of the school exercises in behavior modification, and felt awkward and stupid around the students. I couldn't believe that they wanted me to join! I made the first in a series of monthly donations, and then was directed to a silent, seemingly ineffectual man in the corner, whom they referred to as "The Teacher."

Within a few weeks, I had moved from my home in Hawaii and was living with other students in a house in Carmel, California. For six months I had little contact with anyone outside of the group. The Teacher and his inner circle of leaders took over the house to work on a book and hold meetings. My activities centered on a constant exposure to his words and to carrying out the directions of his leaders. There were mental exercises to be followed in all waking hours, i.e., words that we were to eliminate from our speech; not using contractions; not crossing our legs and physically moving in a manner that indicated intentionality (we looked like robots). When one could begin to adjust to an exercise, it would be changed. I now spoke only in the special "work language" of the school. For five years I followed a word exercise that forbade the use of the word "I." One was to refer to themselves only in the 3rd person. (Try ordering a meal without using "I.") We were used to hearing each other speak, but our special language added to the discomfort of outside communication.

The aim was a heightened state of awareness in which one could regard oneself objectively as a *machine-like being*. Man existed in a state of walking sleep and needed constant shocks in order to awaken to his real potential. My words, reactions, physical appearance, and basic character were always open for discussion by the others. My behavior and attitudes were constantly observed and classified as indications of a "good" student or a 'bad" student. This was always done as suggestions for my own good. I was not supposed to express negativity.

This environment was not all unpleasant. There was a strong feeling of community, a sense of purpose, of spiritual fulfillment, and a *new state of awareness* of the world that was exhilarating. There were times when I felt that I was losing control of my mind. This was taken care of by taking me for a walk where another student would softly remind me that this was simply a stage in my development, and that confusion itself was really a high state. There was a kindness and humility among the lower ranks of students that made me feel accepted. I was approaching all of this as a one-year experiment in self-knowledge.

Three months after joining this "study group", a special meeting was called and it was announced that a woman who had left the school had committed suicide. This was seen as an example of what happens when students do not value the knowledge they have been exposed to. The school had become a lifetime endeavor! (Only for those who were strong enough to succeed.)

We were *now* told that there were invisible higher level beings, called "C Influence" that were around us constantly and would provide shocks to remind us of their presence. When something pleasant, or unpleasant, occurred it was said to be C Influence, providing shocks to awaken me from my lowly state. C Influence spoke directly through the Teacher, and to question this was considered a manifestation of a low level of being. *We had been chosen* to become the enlightened people who would found a new civilization after a soon-to-come nuclear holocaust. **Please remember, this was said in an insulated environment.** I began to think that I was constantly being watched and that even my thoughts were subject to judgement by these "higher forces." Lifton refers to this as the "psychology of the pawn."

When my savings ran out, I began working again in ordinary life and found that there was a profound distance between myself and my co-workers who were not part of the school. I was quiet and just did my work. My "real" life was elsewhere, and I was thoroughly committed to it.

Although the school control never succeeded in becoming absolute, my ability to measure reality and to maintain personal atonomy was greatly diminished. In George Orwell's *1984*, he saw this regulating restraint as being accomplished by means of the 2-way telescreen. But a mechanical device is not necessary when one is sufficiently surrounded by "human" apparatus.

The world became divided into black & white. Ideas, feelings, and actions consistent with school policy were praised. Inconsistencies were explained as a waste of my precious time and an incorrect valuation of the opportunities that had been extended to me. Policy was changed over the years, but an unwavering demand was placed upon me to strive permanently for a perfection which did not exist. I became guilty and depressed. *I was no longer working for something – I was fighting against myself.* Guilt always followed a self-observation, and my repressed negativity could be expressed through complaints about my attitudes. I wanted to "confess" my awareness of a personal failing before someone else could point out it out. The more I admited to weakness, the easier it was to judge others.

I was the enemy! I began to think that I just wasn't capable of knowing myself. Other people's opinion of me was "real." The school became a living being and I was just a cell in it. *The group was more important than me.*

I became a "master of justification." Former cult members all say that they had doubts throughout their involvement. My misgivings became a closely guarded secret, unbearable to admit, even to myself. I developed subtle ways of rebelling, but outwardly I towed the party line. This core of doubt looked for an open door, and I lived in fear of finding it. *It was Catch-22.*

I sided with the liberal-wing of the school, who felt that they could bring about a more humanizing element, and perhaps ensure their own survival. Yet, too often, I took no action against injustice, deceit, and outright bullying by the Teacher's appointed leaders, whose power he supported. I watched children being given away when the Teacher decided they were unecessary distractions. Relationships and marriages were broken at his suggestion. The rich were courted and fleeced. The 10% of gross salary for monthly donations rose with an ever-rising list of required special donations. It was almost impossible (both financially, and as proof of commitment) to live outside of a communal situation. Within a "teaching house" there was little or no room for deviation or personal expression. We were an intellectual and cultural group, but the form this took was always at the whim of the Teacher's taste. He wanted us to become an 18th century culture (imagine a woman's place in such a society), and a large part of funds went to his antique purchases (the finest works went to his home).

Eventually the group had centers in most major cities in the U.S., Europe, and Mexico. The Teacher got the school a State Charter as a Church. He established a winery on the school property in Northern California as a non-profit corporation. We were expected to spend weekends and vacations working at the headquarters. Those with especially high levels of "valuation for the work" lived and worked there full-time. There was no housing provided. People lived crowded together in houses outside the grounds, or in trailers, or slept under a table and kept their belongings in their car trunk. But on Saturday night, they wore tuxedos and gowns to the concert hall, where prestigious musicians would play to an audience who would overwhelm them with applause at the appropriate moments.

In the "SOS" an attitude of *them-versus-us* prevailed. The outside world was dead. Apparently, people who knew too much about the secret activities of the Teacher had been given direct tasks not to tell the others. You were asked to leave if you broke a task. If you left the school you were ostracized.

I was happily married to another student, whom I trusted with some of my doubts. We had a little mixed-breed dog who was very precious to us. I came close to a nervous breakdown in 1980 when the Teacher declared that we could only have pedigreed animals. I began to realize how much control the Teacher had over anything I cared about. I saw only two choices: become quietly insane (as others had), or commit suicide. I could not imagine having the strength to leave the school. My husband Ronald suffered greatly in his fear that I was losing my commitment. He began defending me to people who were offering him advice about changing my behavior. We became part of a developing underground of discontent where small confidences were shared. In time, an ethical member of the Board of Directors discovered criminal actions and called for public censure of the Teacher. This information was strong enough to penetrate through to what was left of my self-respect, and I could not offer a single justification. Even then, I thought that things could now change for the better. A meeting was called, by a representative of the Teacher, to discuss the situation. I brought up my concerns: Students were not free to seek help from mental professionals; many were becoming alcoholics, and we were, generally, living in a state of fear. I was told that *these problems were my imagination and the fear was only within me.* **I snapped!**

I left the group – after 12 years. I felt helpless. I had no friends and was deeply in debt. I couldn't explain the lost years. To the outside world a cult experience itself indicates a flawed mentality. I grieved for those left behind, imprisoned by their learned ability to accept the unacceptable. Ronald, myself, and a few others felt marooned on a strange shore, cringing, clinging, and finally, setting out to discover our new world.

Within a few months, we became part of a former cult members group at the Cult Clinic in Los Angeles. The Clinic was a flame burning in my dark night. I will always be grateful for their understanding. What has been most helpful is hearing that ex-members share the same experience even though the form of each group is different. *What cults believe is not important* (it may be truth or nonsense). The key indication of danger lies in an insulated organization that lacks a system of checks and balances.

I choose to believe that the positive things I retain from my experience are a credit to the sincere relationships I once shared, to my abiding faith in the goodness of God and nature, and to my own intelligence and self-respect.

However, I did not gain this from the "SOS," but rather, in spite of it.

Most ex-cult members do not speak out. Many never realize they were in a cult. They just leave one day, and eventually look for something else to replace it. My activities in cult awareness – reading, writing, lecturing, and creating publications – are looked upon as extreme by some of the people who left the school with me.

The most common reaction to my story is: "Well, that could never happen to me!" I've met with a lot of former members and they are not stupid. Most are highly intelligent. The newer groups are especially appealing to the well-educated. Recruitment is directed to the best, the brightest, and the most idealistic of persons. **Every cult member is a recruiter whose sincerity is infectious.** *Please note:* Because cult members can only associate with people inside the group, they will see outsiders purely as potential recruits or losers. I did not feel I "recruited" my mother and my life-long friend when they joined the "SOS" at my encouragement -- I wanted to "help" them down the one true path.

Mind control exists -- it produces an inability to act from one's own integrity. Brainwashing is spiritual rape. **Remember:** No one ever thinks they are joining a cult.

Barbara Bruno Lancaster

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Ellen Berlfein
Former Six-Year Member of the Unification Church

I always imagined life would be good once I could live out in the country and not have to be concerned with what I thought was the disgusting city life. I would often have romantic fantasies of an idyllic life.

Upon graduating high school I immediately moved up to a small town on the coast of Washington. I chose to go to a college there which would allow me to live out my hoped-for dreams. Through classes such as beekeeping, organic gardening and bird watching I got to taste what "getting back to the land" was like. I remember one day, I was bicycling around the lake where I lived, exploring the country roads. Everything was as I'd hoped for, except for the feeling inside that this beautiful country life just didn't fulfill me. I began to desperately search within for "what has meaning, what has value?" How could I help to make the world a better place and realize my own creative potential? **I want to dedicate my life to something, but what's worth being dedicated to?**

After spending two years at this school, I left to find something new. I spent some time at several craft schools, developing skills in weaving, pottery and

woodworking, but still I was restlessly looking for more. I decided to go back to college, this time in Santa Rosa, California. It was a choice primarily out of default. I spent the first day of school anonymously making my way through the crowds and at the end of the day, while waiting to make a phone call, the girl waiting next to me started up a conversation.

"At last, someone sees that I'm alive," I thought to myself. She explained that she lived on a 600-acre farm in Mendocino with a small group of friends who called themselves, "Creative Community Project." As one of their community projects, they were providing a free dinner which would take place the coming Friday in a nearby park, and I was welcome to join them. I liked Diana, this young woman, right away. Her soft, warm and sincere manner reminded me of myself. Although I only conditionally accepted her dinner offer, the Creative Community Project already sounded like the fulfillment of my dreams.

Friday night arrived after a week of frustrations and disillusionments and with nowhere else to go for dinner, I ended up joining 20 or 30 people gathered in the park. As I approached their campfire, I heard them all singing camp songs, songs for peace, and songs for finding your dream. My heart swelled. They adorned me with compliments and smiles. Some of the smiles were too big and the insincerity bothered me, but the kindness and concern couldn't help but touch me somewhere inside. After dinner, the leader told a short philosophical story. Realizing that this group of people was not only concerned with daily life, but also pursuing deeper questions, enticed me all the more. **The Unification Church, and religion in general, was not even mentioned.**

I was invited to come to a special seminar on their farm in Boonville that weekend. They assured me that I'd have time to get my homework done, so I said I would come. As we drove through the dark night for several hours, I felt I was being carried away into another time, another dimension. We arrived at the farm, where the women were led to a small trailer where one needed a magnifying glass in order to find room to roll out a sleeping bag. I awoke early the next morning, to find myself in the midst of 200 others.

The rest of the weekend was an intense whirlwind of activities and emotions (I certainly never remembered my homework). We were divided into groups of ten, each group with a leader. The day began with individuals in my group (members of the community setting the tone) sharing about their lives prior to joining the Family (as they referred to the Unification Church). Their stories all reflected their search for meaning, love, and happiness in life. After many disillusioning paths, each member of the Family was certain that here they had finally found the perfect road. Their stories sounded similar to my own, and their conviction to the Family couldn't help but captivate me.

After the first group meeting, everyone gathered together to hear a lecture. The weekend continued with lectures and group meetings until Sunday night. The